

The Christian News-Letter

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Edited by
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THE AMSTERDAM ASSEMBLY of the World Council of Churches was so excellently served by Press representatives and broadcast commentators that many of our readers will already have heard more about it than we are able to crowd into our small pages. However, there may be something to be said for expressing at some length a point of view which is that of an active participant rather than of a listener and observer, and as such the Editor of the News-Letter intends for once to write in the first person singular.

NEWS-LETTER

THE AMSTERDAM ASSEMBLY

SUPPLEMENT

RENOVATIO

J. H. O.

For the sake of clarity it may be worth devoting a few sentences to the framework of the Assembly. The core of the Assembly was the 351 delegates appointed by 148 Churches in 42 countries. To them were added an equal number of alternate delegates and a smaller number of consultants, who had taken a share in the preparatory work, and of visitors. There were also a hundred youth delegates.

The organization was superb. One thousand four hundred people were fed and housed. By the method of simultaneous translation diffused by radio, which was used at the Nuremberg trials, all the proceedings in plenary sessions could be heard in English, French and German, at the same time. Every day sheaves of minutes, drafts and notices were poured out for us in three languages by a clerical staff who apparently never went to bed, and, in my

experience of them, were unfailingly obliging, and distributed by young men and women from the Churches who acted as ushers.

The programme of work moved forward from day to day at a steady rate. Chairmen and secretaries, drafting committees and sub-committees, no doubt burned the midnight oil (though they were prevented from feeling heroic about this by the discovery that most of the city of Amsterdam kept up orderly revelry in the streets until the small hours of the morning); but the Assembly itself was never more than a few minutes late for a meal, and closed with all its business finished. This was a tribute alike to good chairmanship and to a restraint of utterance very remarkable to observe. Four morning Section meetings for delegates and consultants, with alternates meeting in parallel Sections, dealt with the work of the four preparatory commissions on the main Assembly theme—Man's Disorder and God's Design. Three of the four afternoon committees hammered out the details of constitution, policy and finance, while the fourth, divided into four parts, dealt with specific concerns referred to the Council by the Churches (the life and work of women in the Church; the Christian approach to the Jew; the significance of the laity in the Church); and with the future of one of the Council's largest undertakings, reconstruction and inter-Church aid.

No steps were taken to make the actual inauguration of the Council impressive, and for this very reason numbers of people found the reading of the brief statement, the simple prayer, and the silence followed by a joyful outbreak of applause, more impressive than the inaugural service. Nothing could exceed the basis in simplicity. The Council is to be "a fellowship of Churches which accept our Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour". This basis was condemned by the Orthodox Conference in Moscow on the ground that "it debases Christian doctrine to the level where according to the Gospel its faith is acceptable even to devils". It accused the ecumenical movement of basing its programme "on the assumption that a machine with a new

'this-wordly' basis can be created, namely the 'ecumenical Church' as an organization within the State, linked to the latter and having an influence in secular affairs". One does not have to go to Moscow to find similar suspicions. Far more effective than any official rebuttal of these accusations was the tone and tenor of much of the conversation both within Sections and committees and outside them. What struck me forcibly was the strong reaction against using the words "accept our Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour" as a mere form of words on which we could all agree. I have never been in a company of Christians where I have found so much emphasis laid by people of all sorts of traditions on the living Headship of Christ in His Church and His living Lordship in the world. I recognized again and again (and this was especially true of the Message Committee which drafted the Message of the Assembly published on its last day of meeting) the sense that our coming together meant primarily not agreement about Christ, but renewed obedience to Him. In this, it seems to me, is the hope for the future.

The other accusation of Moscow seemed to me also to be equally refuted. I found very few people who wanted the Assembly's Message, for example, to be a declaration to the world or a call to statesmen to bring peace and justice, and a large body of opinion which wanted the Assembly to speak modestly and primarily to those within the fellowship of the member Churches. It was very tempting to forget in that vast gathering not only the absence of the representatives of many millions of Christians of the Roman Catholic and Russian Orthodox Churches, but also the small voice that we have in the secular world, and the alienation of many millions, particularly of workers, from the Churches as they know them. But I think these facts were not forgotten, and that there was a sober undertone of realism.

I was by no means the only person who was struck in particular by the moderation—indeed one might say the comparative silence—of the Americans, who did no more than their fair share of the talking, and, far from being

exuberant, often gave the impression of being somewhat subdued. Indeed this was a little worrying, for one knows full well the hopes that have been placed in America on the World Council, symbolized in such an incident as the ringing of church bells every hour on the opening day of the Assembly in some American towns, thousands of miles from the place of our meeting. I have a suspicion that a number of Americans found much of what was said far too eschatological and other-worldly, with too much aspiration and too few brass tacks. They seemed to me to listen to the Continental use of theological language, brought to its most powerful pitch in the torrential opening speech of Karl Barth and his modest, genial, devastating utterances throughout the Assembly, with respect but without conviction. If the Kingdom is, as Karl Barth said, "already come, already victorious, already founded in all its majesty", if there is, again in his words, a "will and plan of God Himself, high above all our Christian ecclesiastical life"—then what is the relation of these indisputable theological facts to our temporal struggles for decent human living for our fellows? The question was never asked in such a way as to bring the matter to a sharp debate in the Assembly, where, of course, it could not possibly have been resolved, but for a number of people (and chiefly for the Americans) there seemed to open up a difference of outlook which had nothing to do with the divisions of Churches, but might become a dividing force amongst us. This is not a matter that can be remitted to the Faith and Order Commission, for it makes itself felt in all aspects of the Council's work, whether it be a consideration of Society, or a discussion of evangelism. But within the context of a mutual determination to understand and to profit from a different point of view, this tension within the life of the World Council may be not only a possible cause of difference but a means to the laying hold of fresh truth.

I cannot omit a reference to the hundred youth delegates. The cheapest food and the liveliest conversation in Amsterdam was to be had by visiting them in their youth hostel. The Youth Department of the World Council of Churches

took enormous and well rewarded pains in the choice of these young people. With only a hundred places, they got representatives from fifty nations and a higher proportion of members of the younger Churches than in the Assembly as a whole. The main object in bringing them together was to give to some of the best young people in the Churches—a few of whom will almost certainly be leaders in the ecumenical movement of the future—an experience of being associated with the Assembly. But they made something of a mark on the Assembly, both individually by their ready friendliness, and corporately by the good work done in some of their Sections ; that on international affairs was particularly mentioned in the Assembly.

THE WORK OF THE SECTIONS

There is not space to say much about the work of the four Sections. The preparatory material on which their discussions were based will be published in book form within a few weeks, and to each volume will be attached the report of the Section as amended and finally received by the voting delegates in the Assembly, and passed on to the Churches for consideration and appropriate action.

Each Section had a membership of about 120 persons, which was too many for intimate discussion. Where real progress was made it was due partly to the two years of work of the preparatory Commissions and partly to the small drafting committees, which were sensitive to the main currents of opinion in the Sections and in every case succeeded to a fair degree in expressing both agreements and divergences clearly. The evidence of this skill is not only manifest in some of the reports but also in the fact that not a single minority report was brought in, either on a whole or on a part of the report of any of the Sections. Only those who have some idea of the profound difference of outlook of the Orthodox even in matters on which other Christians come fairly close to agreement together, will see the importance of the fact that there was no minority report by the Orthodox on any subject. The differences having been very clearly stated within the reports themselves, no

report gives that unequivocal clear-cut guidance which some, no doubt, will expect.

The first Section, on the Universal Church in God's Design, attracted (as Dr. Van Dusen pointed out when he discussed the matter with me in a B.B.C. broadcast) those who felt most strongly on the subject. There was, therefore, a more marked divergence of view in the Section than probably would have been found if a handful of delegates had been picked out at random. Some expressed disappointment that this Section did not seem to get as far as the findings of the Edinburgh Conference, while others gave more weight to the consideration that, after all, Edinburgh had been a picked body of theological experts present in their own capacity and not as official delegates, while at Amsterdam those who spoke had to remember that behind them stood the people of their Churches, who would expect them to remember that fact. This is not a Section that I would ever have chosen to be in, yet as I listened to the presentation in the Assembly and read the report afterwards I found that I wanted to go back to the preparatory work and re-read it with new interest. The very fact that the report could be presented to the Assembly by an American Methodist and a member of the Orthodox Church was in itself a sign of how many chasms must have been bridged, or at least charted.

In the third Section, on the Disorder of Society, we expected more disagreements than we actually found. There was a lively discussion on Communism, with expressions of view from the east and the west, from those who were very reluctant to condemn Communism as well as from those who were out-and-out opponents. Yet there was a broad basis of agreement on the grounds on which Christians must deny some at least of the claims of Communists. What the final report lacks, it seems to me, is a note of tremendous urgency and realization of the revolutionary momentum of Communism, or a frank enough admission of the undoubted fact that many thousands of middle-class Christians never come in contact with Communists or with the

conditions that have made men Communists. One thing I was very grateful for was the recognition that no Christian statement on Communism makes sense unless at the same time it tries to deal equally faithfully with Capitalism.

The range of the Section was very wide, dealing with the economic, political and racial disorder of modern technical and scientific society, and enumerating briefly the marks of a free and responsible society—a range wide enough to allow a number of words to be used with considerable confidence and not quite enough careful thought. We tended to say that any régime which concentrates economic power in the hands of a central Government is *ipso facto* totalitarian; and this word totalitarian is one that needs a great deal of analysis in Christian circles. My main criticism of the Section, however, would be that although there were Orientals and Africans present, who raised their voices as often as they could, they were not powerful enough to break the prevailing conception that the world is Europe and America. It is going to be a great organizational problem in the World Council as a whole to get the Oriental view adequately expressed. It is not just that they should be allowed to express dissent on this and that point: the outlook of their peoples has always been profoundly different, and it is so in a new sense since the war. The events in India and Indonesia have had a psychological effect throughout the East and among all Colonial peoples. Again, while we in the West tend more and more to deplore the technical society, the East eagerly seeks technical development in order to lift the intolerable load of poverty and disease from the backs of millions. Unless Christians in the West are very careful, they tend to give the impression that, having experienced the industrial revolution in their own nations, which made a lot of wealth from it, they do not want to see other nations struggle out of poverty or to help them to do so.

The fourth Section, that on international affairs, opened a wide field for debate. The debate centred, as might have been supposed, on the question of war and peace, and the official report brought to the Assembly outlined—

as did the report of the Oxford Conference on the same subject—three possible Christian attitudes to war. Without much protest the Assembly accepted this “solution”. It is really an appalling situation that in the years between Oxford and Amsterdam, in which we suffered so much and were forced at times to see war as the only fact governing and disposing our outward lives, we should have failed to make an inch of visible progress in this burning matter. Many individual Christians with much travail of soul have changed their points of view, but in the ears of the world the trumpet gives out a very uncertain note.

To many of us it was a surprise that the second Section, that on the Witness of the Church, had the greatest difficulty in finding unanimity of expression, and the report was brought into the Assembly at a late date. There is a salutary reminder in this fact: we all agree in a general way that it is the duty of all Christians to witness to the faith they believe, and the task of the Church to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ to every creature throughout all the world in such a way as to make disciples of all men; but when a group of people from markedly different Churches and national situations sit down together to discuss their obedience to the Lord’s command they find themselves caught on the one hand in the difficulties which confronted Section I, and on the other by the disordered society discussed in Section III. One of the happiest moments in the Assembly was when Bishop Stephen Neill, presenting the subject of the second Section to the whole Assembly on the second day, before the Sections began their work, left the text of the speech already in typescript and talked simply and imaginatively about actual men and women finding God. In its final draft, the report of this Section gets away both from a preoccupation with the form and content of the Churches’ message and from too great a concentration on the present condition of the world to which that message has to be preached, and, while it has something to say about both, comes at its end to this conclusion: “As we have studied evangelism in its ecumenical setting we have been burdened with a sense of urgency. . . . If the Gospel really is a matter

of life and death, it seems intolerable that any human being now in the world should live out his life without ever having the chance to hear and receive it”.

The future of the World Council of Churches is, in the most simple and profound sense, in the hands of God. The Churches have announced before the world their intention to stay together, and have corporately acknowledged God's goodness in bringing them thus far. No-one knows what outer circumstances or inner tensions may do. The old provisional Committee, a small and vigorous fellowship, is replaced henceforth by a central Committee of a hundred members appointed by the member Churches. G. D. H. Cole once wrote a News-Letter Supplement called “Democracy Face to Face with Hugeness”, and the World Council is not going to be immune from the intractable difficulties of size, time and distance. The able and devoted staff which has served the Council so well will be increased and without doubt will do much both to pursue practical objectives and, in doing so, to help the World Council to be a living fellowship.

The Council could not have come into existence without the large vision and unstinted generosity of the Churches of the United States, which during the last ten years have provided all but a small fraction of its resources. We have to accept on the one hand the fact that many Churches are, and some will remain, poor, and have to make decisions between many good claims on their finance; on the other hand, can all Churches say “This is *our* Council” unless they are contributing to its funds? The Central Committee has been instructed to examine the budget of 1950 with this in mind, and as soon as possible thereafter to regulate expenditure in such a way that at least one-fourth of the whole comes from outside the United States. There is sound Christian wisdom in trying to reflect our aspirations and hopes for the future in our finance.

Kathleen Bliss

RENOVATIO

WE are glad to be able to call the attention of readers of the Christian News-Letter to a small book bearing the above title published last year in Germany by a Roman Catholic layman.¹ It contains ideas closely akin to those which led to the foundation of the Christian Frontier, and gives them striking expression. They are highly relevant also to questions which engaged the attention of the Amsterdam Assembly.

The author, Professor Ernst Michel, was at one time a professor in the University of Frankfurt. He has taken active part in political and educational movements, and has made a name for himself as a student of religion and of the social sciences. He took up in later life the study of psychology and was for some years a practising psychiatrist. He exerts a wide influence, especially among younger Roman Catholics. The aim which has guided him in all his varied activities, and to which he has devoted himself with unusual concentration, has been to discover what it means to be a Christian in contemporary society.

Renovatio, which has as its sub-title, "A Dialogue between the Church and the World," contains two papers which are, in fact, though not by design, an epitome of the questions and answers with which Professor Michel's writings during the past twenty-five years have been primarily concerned. What follows is an attempt to convey to readers of the Christian News-Letter the core of what is packed into the pages of this small book.

CHRISTIANITY AND THE SECULAR

The title of the second of the two papers, "The Secular Form of Christian Activity", might suggest that there is another, perhaps higher, form of Christian activity to be distinguished from the secular, i.e. the religious. Many people think that the religious practice of the Christian life,

¹ The publishers are *Verlag der Gesellschaft, Oberschwaben, Aulendorf*.

that is to say, Church life in the narrower sense, is the original and true form of the Christian life and that the secular activity of Christians is secondary as being in some sense an "application" of the other. If this is true the first and most important thing is to stand fast in the religious sphere, to take part in its activities, to look on the Church as a sacred sphere opposed to the world, and then, from this base, to come to terms as best one can with the claims of the world by "applying", so far as circumstances permit, the truths and commandments of religion to secular affairs. The world is thought of as the place where moral principles are "applied", rather than as the sphere in which faith is put to the test.

But that, Professor Michel says, is a totally mistaken view of Christianity and of the Church, if one has regard to their origin and essential nature. Christ did not come to found a new religion, like the founders of the great historical religions, but by His words and deeds, His life, death and resurrection to usher in a turning-point in history—the advent of the Kingdom of God. In Him new life broke into the world ; He is the beginning and the pledge of its redemption. The Church, the company of those who believe in Him, is the salt of the earth, a new leaven working in the world and history, seeking to permeate these realms and renew them by the power of the new life. The Christian dividing-line does not run between the sphere of religion and the sphere of the secular. In the heart and centre of the common life of the world it divides those who live this common life in the power of faith, seeking to transform and renew it from the roots up, and those who live and act in unbelief, that is in self-centredness and pride.

There is only one place at which a genuine renewal of the life of the Church can take place, namely at the point at which its mission of transforming the world is being fulfilled. The only real renewal is a healing and saving manifestation of the power of love in open and courageous encounter with the world. The Church is not a separate sphere of existing reality, distinct from the natural world

and history ; it is a new dimension of reality penetrating these realms and transforming them. The essential life of the Church is an unrestricted energy of freely working love within the world. As minister of the forgiving and healing love of God, the Church has to enter into the whole structure of society and mingle with the sinfulness of secular life. It is only in the place where men sin that they can be redeemed. The new life in Christ has its reality, its centre, its manifestation, not in any separate religious sphere, but in the life of every-day, in the context of the natural world and history, in every act which the Christian performs in faith.

Eternal life in the New Testament does not mean the future life, but describes the *quality* of the life of those who have been born again into the Kingdom of God. Eternity is not a place to which men will one day go, but the character which the redeemed life has from its beginning. The important distinction between the two worlds is not the fact of death, separating the present world from one beyond, but the radical conversion which takes place in those who die and are raised with Christ. This consciousness of a historical salvation has been entirely lost by most Christians—the consciousness of being, as the Church of Jesus Christ in creation and history, the people of the new age, the first fruits of the world to come, and of their responsibility to live in the power of that election and calling.

THE FREEDOM OF THE CHILDREN OF GOD

The Christian life is a life rooted in the centre of the Christian revelation, that is to say, in the forgiveness of sins and in the gift of new life that accompanies forgiveness and manifests itself in faith, hope and love. These supernatural virtues, and not a so-called Christian moral law, are the driving impulses of the new Christian life in the freedom of the children of God.

It is a life which is lived anew every moment in continual exercise of trust and obedience. Its secret is expressed in the words of Samuel to Saul after he had anointed him King : " Let it be that thou do as occasion serve thee ; for God is with thee " ; or, as St. Augustine's Christian version of

the same idea, "Love, and do what thou wilt". The life of the Christian is an unceasing dialogue with God in the continually renewed encounters of life. Dogmas and the moral law are intended to further and aid this living intercourse of the individual person with God. When they are set up as absolutes, or as having independent authority in themselves, they become barriers to men's openness to the living God in daily listening and living response. The self-sufficient reason is made to take the place in the living spirit working freely in the service of healing love. There is no specifically Christian moral law distinguishable from other moralities. But the moral decisions, which outwardly may not differ from those of others, are transformed in the Christian, being taken in the obedience of faith and by being suffused with love. A Christian acts in a situation through an entirely objective response to its demands. He lives in human insecurity; he is never free from the necessity of taking risks. He makes his venture, not knowing what the outcome will be.

The manifestation of love in the life of faith may often find quite sober and prosaic expression. There may be no conscious attempt to fulfil the law of love in a man's simple, concrete, objective response to what the situation requires. The hidden love which issues from a lively faith can suffuse an act which outwardly merely conforms to the demands of ordinary morality to an extent of which the actor is often unaware.

The measure of a man's openness to reality is proportionate to his courage and trustfulness in his attitude to the world. These are the fruits of faith. Anxiety loses its hold, and feverish attempts, open or secret, to snatch security are no longer necessary. Their place is taken by a calm realism and absence of all preconceived opinions; a self-command, which allows an opponent to say freely what he wants to say. Along with this is a growing readiness and capacity to find the centre of one's life in others. The more a man lives by faith, the less alien a place the world seems to him; he becomes less and less self-centred and wrapped up in his own concerns.

The courage and trustfulness that spring from faith manifest themselves in a calmness and patience in action—in a readiness and capacity to do at the right moment the thing that is necessary, in the confidence that as we face the situation its demands will become clear, and that the help that we need will be given to us, if we are truly receptive. That is the core of what has been called the Christian “ethics of the situation”, the practice of which is impossible without the courage of faith, the creative power of love and the adventuresomeness of hope. With it goes an increasing ability to mingle freely and fruitfully in the affairs and conditions of men, unfettered by the dead hand of an outworn past.

In outward behaviour Christian life and activity in the world does not markedly differ from current practice. What is peculiar to it is not something that strikes the eye. But it has a different, invisible, fundamental structure, into which the life of every day is absorbed and by which it is transformed and renewed. The influence of this makes itself felt in the social environment, through the fact that all that is due to self-will, self-centredness and egotism falls away or is transformed, that there is an absence alike of feverish haste and of sluggish acquiescence, that new solutions unexpectedly present themselves as it were of their own accord and that the complexity of things is dissolved in a new simplicity of purpose. All this, however, is the natural fruit of Christian living, not its deliberately chosen aim or conscious method, and is perceptible only to the eye of faith.

THE CHURCH AS THE MESSIANIC COMMUNITY

It would be a complete misunderstanding of Professor Michel's meaning to suppose that what he has primarily in mind is a purely personal type of piety. It is true that he devotes a whole section of his book showing the significance of Kierkegaard's “category of the individual”, and insists that without the individual, whom God calls by his personal name, and who responds to that call in the personal adventure of faith, the religion of the Churches becomes a Ghetto

and hardens into a creed. This "freedom of the Christian man" is indeed the very life-blood of the Church. But it in turn presupposes the Church and can be realized only *in* the Church.

The Christian, like everyone else, belongs to the natural and historical orders and lives in these spheres. But his membership of these spheres acquires a new character and direction from the fact that he participates in all his secular activities *as a member of the Church*. The Church as the messianic community, as the bearer of the seeds of the Kingdom of God, is the appointed instrument for the transformation of the present age into the life of the age to come. It is certainly part of its mission to gather men through a radical conversion into the community of those who have died and risen with Christ. But that is merely the first step. The real task of the Church is to heal and renew the course of the world, to free it from domination by the powers of evil, to transform this present age, which is subject to sin and the law, by the powers of the new life working through love, into the Kingdom of God. The Church as a special, separate community is in its origin and essence only a call for the perpetual renewal of its true life, which expresses itself in the continuous redemption and transformation of the common life of men. The destiny of the Church, the deepest secret of its life, is to die continually in the redemptive service of the world and to rise again in a reborn natural and historical—that is to say, secular—life. This relation of the Church to the whole life of humanity as the instrument of a historical salvation is of central importance for a right understanding by the individual Christian of the meaning of his own life. The responsibility he is called to bear is responsibility as a member of the Church and he is thus lifted out of his isolation and independence as an individual soul and set in the context of the relation of the Church to the world of nations and the relation of the new age to the present.

THE NEW HOUR OF TESTING

In the present bankruptcy of national life, in which the earlier forms of Christianization have been dissolved or

spent their force and can no longer be restored, the centre of gravity in the vindication of Christian faith has certainly shifted strongly to the public sphere. The course of history has swept the ground from under the feet of those who cling to earlier methods of widespread individual or mass evangelism and of influencing governments or other areas of the secular life by ecclesiastical action. Such methods have become antiquated and powerless in the epochal crisis and catastrophe through which mankind is passing. In the disintegrating life of to-day, the forms in which the Christian faith can and must vindicate itself are no longer the traditional ones of doctrine, or moral code, or the extension of intensive cultivation of a special religious sphere of life. What has become essential is the ministry of creative love, the translation of the power of faith into the creating of human community in all kinds of groupings in the secular life. Only out of the midst of such activities can Christian doctrine recover its creative power—not from them as the source, but yet only in association with them. Only in this way can doctrine become filled again with life and be a guiding star for action in concrete responsibility. According to St. Paul the source of the new life is the Holy Spirit, and he bids us walk in the Spirit. Walking in the Spirit shows itself in the first instance in a capacity for discernment and judgment. “Be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind that ye may *prove* what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God.” This faculty of proving, in which deliberate judgment is combined with spontaneous commitment, is the mark of deliverance from the bondage of the law into the freedom of the children of God.

J. H. O.

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